



# News Release

## US Army Corps Of Engineers

Los Angeles District  
Public Affairs Office  
P.O. Box 532711  
Los Angeles, CA 90053-2325

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<u>Mike Tharp</u>	<u>(213) 452-3921</u>	
Contact	publicaffairs-spl@usace.army.mil	Telephone

### SANTA CLARITA PERCHLORATE PROJECT CASTS CORPS IN STARRING CLEANUP ROLE

The first documented discovery of gold in California.

The first successful oil well in the West.

Those two historical examples, in 1842 and 1876, of good stuff found in the ground of the Santa Clarita Valley are overshadowed today by some bad stuff in that same ground—perchlorate and other chemicals contaminating soil and groundwater. And like silent screen cowboys Tom Mix and William S. Hart, who made the valley's vistas the backdrop for many of their westerns, the Army Corps of Engineers is riding to the rescue.

With its local sponsor, the Castaic Lake Water Agency, the Los Angeles District is conducting a feasibility study on how best to clean up subterranean pockets of the noxious salt, which has been called a human health risk by the EPA. Corps contractors are now drilling wells up to 1,650 feet deep on a 1,000-acre sphere of land to get samples of soil and water to test. The two-phase study, currently budgeted for \$7 million, is expected to cost more than \$9 million and may get \$3 million more this fiscal year. The Castaic agency is sharing costs with the Corps 50-50.

"I compliment the Corps on the progress it has made so far," says Dan Masnada, general manager of the water agency. "Its role will be critical in helping us define the nature and extent of the contamination. The Corps is providing the data that will assist us in our efforts to remediate the groundwater contamination. So often people look at the federal government or large bureaucracies and criticize them for how long it takes to get anything done, but certainly in this instance, I'm very happy with the Corps's progress and work."

Adds Lisa Hardy, a senior planner for the city who's been monitoring the cleanup project for years: "We're very enthusiastic about the Corps's involvement. The Corps has done the most cleanup work we've seen on the site, and we hope they continue the work through 2003-2004. We're thrilled."

Once they get the data, the Corps and the water agency will huddle with other regulatory bodies, elected officials, residents, private companies and others to decide on long-term treatment technology solutions. A possible method is a pump-and-treat process cleanup strategy. "Pumping and treating equipment could be sitting out there for months and possibly years," says District Project Manager Ayed Ireifej, "pumping out the water, cleaning it and reinjecting back into the ground, provided it's clean, with any contaminated water disposed off-site." The water agency's immediate goal is to find an interim solution so it can reactivate the wells and again use them to draw water.

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Sacramento District is also providing some of its environmental expertise in the field, and L.A. District's Priscilla Perry, then a technical manager in the Engineer Division, was instrumental in pulling the project together early on.

The Corps' involvement comes at a critical juncture in nationwide efforts to gauge and deal with the perchlorate problem. Up to 20 states, many of them in the West, contain sites with contamination levels higher than that recommended by new EPA guidelines. Most worrisome, several of the sites feed into aquifers and other sources of drinking water for heavily populated urban areas. The EPA, for instance, has detected perchlorate in 284 drinking water sources in Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside Counties.

And, as the West's metastasizing edge cities show, the old real estate mantra of "location, location, location" must now include "water, water, water." Without it, there is no, or slow, growth. The perchlorate problem could well determine whether a city can expand, whether a developer can build, whether a farmer can irrigate, if wells and other sources of water are shut down. Thus the Corps could be in the eye of a regulatory hurricane sweeping across several states. "If there's no water, you can't grow anymore," says Ireifej, "which creates not only a health problem but a growth problem."

In nearly all cases, perchlorate contamination comes at former defense industry sites. In Santa Clarita, the area where the Corps is working—between I-5 and Highway 114—has hosted companies for more than 60 years that made dynamite, ammunition, practice bombs, flares, signal cartridges, fireworks, boosters and other explosives-related products. From 1967-99 the site was owned by Whittaker Corp., which, according to the Signal daily newspaper in Santa Clarita, made gas generators, rockets, practice bombs and Sidewinder missiles.

In 1997 scientists detected perchlorate in four wells producing drinking water, with levels slightly above Dept. of Health Services (DHS) standards. A year later, the chemical salt was confirmed in two wells, again with levels above DHS standards. All the wells remain shut down.

Santa Clarita's situation is complicated by the fact that in recent years the site has been privately owned by a Phoenix-based company, Remediation Financial Inc. (RFI). The firm's subsidiary, Santa Clarita LLC, had been continuing some of the development plans originally proposed by Whittaker: Porta Bella, a complex which would feature nearly 3,000 homes, an industrial park and other facilities. It was after the Santa Clarita City Council approved the project in 1995 that the perchlorate problem was discovered, and the private firm has been hamstrung financially in its plans ever since. RFI is now trying to sell the property, and lawsuits and counterclaims have ensued over who's responsible for paying how much of the cleanup.

In late November, the Signal newspaper reported that a North Carolina company, Cherokee Investment Partners Inc., had agreed to buy the land from RFI. Although the agreement isn't yet completed, the deal dovetails with Cherokee's corporate portfolio, which includes some 300 "brownfield" properties nationwide. According to Dow Jones Newswires, Cherokee pays cash for the properties and indemnifies the sellers against future liabilities stemming from contamination.

Whatever happens, it's become clear to many Santa Clarita stakeholders and others that, without the Corps' measured intervention and impartial data retrieval, nothing would get done, other than finger-pointing. Says Ireifej: "Sometimes we see ourselves in the middle, between the site owner and members of the community. It's a very tough balance, but we try to keep the balance and do what we've been directed by Congress to do."

Sounds a lot like what William S. Hart (for whom a Santa Clarita high school is named) said when asked how he became a cowboy movie star in the 1920s: "If they want you, they want you, and you have mighty little to say about it."